What’s good for women is good for India

Championing the cause of women’s rights is essential for the vitality of what India aspires to do for the well-being of all citizens.

Lakshmi Puri

Savitri Boiyan earns a living by selling broomsticks and tamarind leaves that she collects in a nearby field or forest. To sell them at the weekly market, she walks nine kilometres and carries the load on her head. On a good day, she earns ₹50, which is not even sufficient to feed her family of four. Her greatest fear is that her children will lead the same life of insecurity and deprivation that she has. Many women like Savitri who are poor and illiterate face a similar dilemma.

UN Women’s report ‘Hearts and Minds: Women of India Speak’ will be launched to commemorate International Women’s Day today during the ‘Inspiring Change’ conference with the European Union. The report captures the voices of women like Savitri and hundreds of grassroots elected women representatives who remain completely marginalised.

While their lives have improved with greater visibility, education and employment opportunities, the women report that they still do not have proper access to water, sanitation, housing, roads and electricity. They cite low literacy, lack of financial independence and highly patriarchal values as the major hurdles they face on a daily basis.

India has demonstrated the political will to make significant changes and champions a transformative goal to achieve gender equality within the United Nations 2015-30 sustainable development framework.

The proposed universal goal, to be adopted as part of the post-millennium development goals sustainable development agenda, has three targets relevant globally and in India. First, end violence against women and girls. To counter violence, India has enacted laws to tackle sex discrimination, child marriage, domestic violence and sexual harassment. But laws are useless if not implemented effectively. Research shows that higher conviction rates, better-quality services, and quicker responses can deter violence and encourage increased reporting of crimes. The system should strengthen protection for survivors and ensure the prosecution of perpetrators.

In addition to better services, prevention is also essential. Youth idols can influence young men and shape more positive attitudes towards women. Parents and teachers must sensitise children on gender issues.

The second target addresses the root causes of gender inequality and creates opportunities for women. Only 68% of Indian women are literate as compared to 82% of men. Patriarchal values restrict women’s mobility and life choices, including employment. Though 80% of rural women are engaged in agriculture, only 12% own property. And women are concentrated in the least productive sectors of the informal sector, working with little social security. Stronger policies supportive of the caretaking roles of men and women, such as child care and parental leave, can relieve working women of their “double duty”.

The third target calls for an increased participation of women in decision-making. This is a pertinent issue for democracy. Despite the advances made in 21st century India, women account for only 10% of seats in Parliament. The women’s reservation Bill, which would guarantee to women one-third of seats in the national legislature, has waited 15 years for endorsement. When over 56 democracies globally have exceeded that, usually through special measures, India can do better. Improving the participation of women makes good political and business sense. Almost 1.5 million elected women representatives now occupy 42% of seats in local panchayati raj Institutions throughout the country.

India leads by example to champion the cause of women not only for the sake of justice but also for the vitality of all that India’s leadership aspires to do for the well-being of its citizens. Shaping the global debate on UN Women’s Gender Equality Goal will guarantee that the Savitris will not be left behind.

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The views expressed by the author are personal.